

# MAKING CONNECTIONS AND IDENTIFYING PARTNERS



## What Policymakers Need to Know and What They Can Do

### What Policymakers Should Know

State entities have access to low-income fathers; community-based programs have services that can help low-income fathers.

Many low-income fathers come into contact with state institutions if they fail to pay child support. Often this failure is the result of unemployment or low-wage employment.

Without formal relationships with state institutions such as child support, local programs are less effective at helping fathers negotiate child support and visitation issues.

Collaboration between state and community-based entities is challenging, and there are concerns about accountability.

State systems usually regard mothers and children as their clients; fatherhood programs view themselves as advocates for fathers, making it difficult to find a common ground.

Collaboration may involve relationships with entities that have never considered themselves partners.

Community-based fatherhood services are able to develop a sense of trust that state agencies are not able to develop.

Low-income fathers are afraid of involvement with state entities for fear that their only interest is to punish them.

Low-income fathers are more likely to participate in fatherhood programs if they experience a tangible benefit.

### What Policymakers Can Do

4 Facilitate collaborative relationships between local service providers and state entities like child support enforcement agencies and court systems.

4 Use state institutions as a connection point to refer low-income fathers to help them get jobs.

4 Develop a community outreach strategy that helps community providers better understand systemic issues related to child support and visitation.

4 Create a liaison that works directly with program providers to coordinate negotiations regarding child support issues.

4 Develop a unified vision that all partners can support—directing services that help mothers and fathers support children may be a unifying principle.

4 Identify the role each partner will play in the larger collaboration effort, using the strengths of each partner.

4 Facilitate a communication mechanism that enables partners to make joint decisions about the direction of client services; develop consistent communication schedule.

4 Build relationships with welfare agencies, judicial systems, corrections, Healthy Start, Head Start, school systems, employers, workforce development boards and women's advocates.

4 Use partnerships as a way to offer job training in exchange for help with child support orders.

4 Use partnerships to offer alternatives to punishment—participation in programs as an alternative to jail.

4 Use employment as a way to encourage participation in other programming aspects—paternity establishment, child support compliance, developing parenting plans, mediation, child development or peer support.

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**Q: Child support agencies should focus on collecting support and community-based programs should focus on helping their clients, so why should they work together?**

A: Child support agencies (and other government institutions) try to collect support and serve many of the same families that community-based programs try to help. Child support agencies have a difficult time collecting from fathers who don't have jobs or whose jobs do not pay enough to support families. Community-based programs can help fathers get jobs but have trouble convincing their clients to keep jobs if their child support orders are set so high they do not have anything left. Fostering partnerships can help each to function more efficiently and more successfully, resulting in greater gains for children who depend on responsible parents.

**Q: Why should programs forge relationships with women's organizations or women's advocates if they are providing services to fathers?**

A: Women's advocates sometimes misunderstand fatherhood services. These advocates may feel that such services are an attempt to supplant the critical role that women and mothers play in the lives of their children. Overcoming these assumptions can enable fatherhood services and women's services to work together to provide services that benefit children. Additionally, women can be used to help recruit fathers to participate in programs that assist with employment, parenting and child development through their involvement with programs such as Head Start, Healthy Start, WIC and welfare. Many low-income women report their support for fatherhood services particularly because they have helped fathers to ease some of the hardships that never-married women face as they raise their children.

**Q: How can legislators help to foster collaboration?**

A: Legislators can facilitate the development of oversight boards, policy councils or commissions that can do the work of forming collaborations. They can use the budget process to direct funding through various agencies that agree to use community programs to provide services. Within statute, they can require agencies to develop partnerships with each other and develop programming goals for service delivery for fathers that include community agencies.